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ABSTRACT

Twenty-one elementary and secondary school teachers enrolled in a course called "Writing Research: A Teacher-Researchers Seminar." The course met for 3 hours every 2 weeks during the school year. Teachers spent the first half of each class either discussing a series of research articles or talking with a visiting researcher. During the second half of the class, they met in small groups to discuss research in progress. The pivot of the course was each teacher's classroom folder. From these, the teachers developed their own research questions, gathered and analyzed data, and wrote up their findings either as an article, research paper, or research proposal. As the course progressed, it became apparent that the teachers were no longer awed and intimidated by research. Rather, they grew more confident reading and criticizing the research findings of others as they became more involved in their own. Writing honestly about their classroom problems also led teachers to a greater self assurance and encouraged them to change their teaching. Their research plans often became their lesson plans. They became more tolerant of creative chaos in their thinking and therefore more understanding of its appearance in their students' thinking and writing. Clearly teacher-researchers need the opportunity to conduct and follow up on their research. If many teachers in a school system were involved in classroom research, their findings could be combined and meaningful quantitative studies could begin. (HOD)

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Window Sill: Teacher-Researchers and the Study of Writing Process

by

Marian M. Mohr

After several review sentences, polite nods in the direction of previous researchers, the transition sentence appears: "Little is known, however, about . . . " after which the researcher takes off into the new territory. This sentence sums up the literature search, the difficult discovery of the topic, and the hope that this little known territory is significant, truly new, and is now, in this research report, to be mapped.

As I read educational research I look for that sentence as a sign of hope that research is a help. Frequently, however, I think of the repeated Josh Billings comment about people who "know what ain't so." Researchers, particularly those who do quantitative and experimental studies, seem to know a lot that ain't so when their findings are required to survive the context of the classroom. Teachers, on the other hand, work daily without benefit of research knowledge in areas where little is known.

How can a teacher <u>not</u> be interested in educational research? And how can an educational researcher not be interested in the classroom context? I think the apparent contradiction has several origins. Educational research has traditionally been conducted by outsiders, usually from universities, who conduct their studies and report their findings in their terminology to their readers. They may not see teachers as part of their audience and they usually

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do not see dissemination of their findings to teachers as part of their responsibility as researchers. They publish for different reasons. Teachers, although frequently the target of criticism concerning their teaching and lack of knowledge about research findings, are usually described as being uninterested in research and caring only for practical classroom suggestions.

Donald Graves, in a series of articles about writing research (1981), describes this background of estrangement and takes issue with experimental and quantitative methodology when used to understand writing. Graves asserts that teachers can and should conduct qualitative research in their classrooms; in fact, that they are in the best possible position to do so because of their understanding of the variables involved.

Previous to Graves's series, articles about teachers and writing research tended to concentrate on summarizing recent findings and encouraging teachers to use them (Haynes, 1978; Vukelich and Golden, 1981). Lee Odell (1976) encourages English teachers to conduct research, although he assumes that the methodology will be experimental, using control groups and comparing teaching strategies. Ann Berthoff (1979), speaking to the California Teachers of English, emphasizes the importance of discovering and writing about the theory underlying teaching practices and applauds teachers conducting basic research.

There are other beginnings. Dixie Goswami suggests that classroom teachers conduct case studies of themselves as writers and teachers of writing followed by the study of a student writer. Nancie Atwell in Boothbay, Maine, is leading a group of teachers who are following the Goswami model (1982). Lucy Calkins, a research associate of Graves's, has served as consultant to a

program in Scarsdale, New York, where teachers work in a collaborative relationship with college researchers to conduct classroom writing research toward writing a new curriculum.

In England, Nick May of the University of East Anglia is collecting data on the teacher as researcher. He represents a growing interest in teacher research also evidenced by the publication of A Teachers' Guide to Action Research (Nixon, 1981), a series of articles defining action research as inquiry by teachers into their teaching practices. The book offers many suggestions for conducting such research and for using the findings in curriculum planning.

At least two teacher-researcher reports have been recently published. Mary Ellen Giacobbe, a teacher at the school where Graves conducted his two-year study of elementary students' writing, conducted and published a study of her own, "Kids can write the first week of school" (1981). The Bay Area Writing Project is encouraging teachers to conduct classroom research and has now published its first teacher-researcher report, Writing in High School Science (Wotring and Tierney, 1982).

I found out about these far-flung efforts at encouraging teacher-researchers because, although a high school English teacher, I am on leave for two years to work with the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University. In my new role as a college professor, I am expected to conduct research, and in 1980-81 I completed a study of the revision processes of high school students and college freshmen. I struggled to write up my findings as a combination research report and practical handbook for teachers.

Reflecting on my roles as teacher and researcher I realized that when I began to think of myself as a researcher, I began to teach differently. I had kept a teaching journal for years: it had become a research log. I had begun asking my students questions and recording their answers to study as data, not to grade. My students were becoming experts on their revision processes and that was helping them become better revisers. The more I thought about this and wrote about it (Mohr, 1981) the more I noticed that "very little is known" about what happens to teachers who conduct writing research in their classrooms.

The first questions led to many others.

What kind of research questions do teachers have?
Will teachers do valuable original research?
Does conducting research cause teachers to have role conflicts?
What is the effect of their research on their students?
Do they change as teachers and if so, in what ways?
What do they need as support systems?
Are they more valued as teacher-researchers by their school systems?
Will they become more interested in the research of others?
Will they continue to investigate new research questions?

Through the NVWP and GMU, I offered a course called "Writing Research: A Teacher-Researcher Seminar." Twenty-one teachers signed up. All but one of them had had at least one background course in the teaching of writing. All but five had been in the NVWP Summer Institute. Otherwise, they are a heterogeneous group with a variety of teaching assignments--twelve in high school, three in intermediate school, and six in elementary school.

Some teach the most able students in their schools in newly organized courses for "gifted and talented" students or courses labeled "advanced placement." Others teach in courses variously labeled "basic," "consumer," "Level II," or "academically unsuccessful," all referring to the less able students in the

schools' programs. Some teach classes of students at many ability and achievement levels, including students for whom English is a second language.

Some teach in special resource programs--one in reading, one in learning disabilities, and two in Title I. Two are temporarily out of the classroom, one as a general resource teacher for a group of schools and one on maternity leave. (Although irrelevant to the study, it should, I think, be noted that two of the teachers left the course for a couple of weeks to have babies, returning to complete their research.)

The elementary teachers, of course, see writing as a part of all the disciplines they teach, and one did her study on writing to learn math. At the secondary level, one member of the class is a history teacher, one teaches mostly Latin although she did her research in her one English class, and one is writing a follow-up study of research conducted the year before on writing in high school chemistry. (She is co-author if the Bay Area Writing Project research report mentioned earlier.)

The course plan was to meet every two weeks during the school year (a three credit course lasting two semesters) and to spend the first half of the three hours either discussing a series of research articles or talking with a visiting researcher, and the second half meeting in small groups of four to discuss research in progress. Eventually Ann Legge, a GMU research intern, and I prepared a bibliography for the class that included additional sources as well as the articles we were all reading together.

The pivot of the course action was the folder of each teacher. At each class

meeting they turned in samples of their logs, data, and analysis. I read them and wrote comments on the folder. They developed research questions, gathered data, analyzed data, and wrote up their findings either as an article, an I-search paper (following the Macrorie model in Searching Writing, 1980), or a research proposal.

At first I had planned to continue my revision research with my freshman composition students as a way of sharing the experiences of the teachers in the course. By the second class meeting, however, I decided to begin a study of the teachers themselves, assuming the same role with them that they assumed with their students. My early research log entries, like those of the teachers, are almost entirely questions with plenty of self-doubt.

> Oct.14 — First night. Excitement. What changes may happen to these teachers? What do I think will happen? What do I want to happen? What should I look at? What model? What did I assign? Another observation? Should I set goals for each group meeting? What do I want to know? How teachers change?

In addition to my research log, I decided to analyze their research logs, notes and tapes of class discussions, and records of individual conferences. I did not observe in their classrooms, partly for lack of time but also because something held me back, as if doing so would indicate that I did not find their self-reports accurate and trustworthy. I did not wish to undermine my teaching role as one who believed in their capabilities and believed that they could be honest observers of their own teaching. This situation, I was to discover, is a teacher-researcher role tension. When were we teachers, when researchers? We learned to be both and to record our actions carefully.

We all worked hard and were conscious of being in new territory. Many times during the year we doubted what we were doing and wrote research log entries full of questions. The course is now over and the teachers' articles are the final addition to my data collection. As I finished reading the drafts of the articles, I felt envy that the other teachers in the class were nearing the end of their analysis and I was just beginning. But I also felt excitement at knowing, already, what a wealth of interesting discoveries were to come.

Like the other teacher-researchers in the class, I have been studying and analyzing data as I collected it and have some confidence that my hunches will develop into findings. At present they divide into answers to three questions:

1. What happened in their research processes?
2. What happened in their teaching?
3. What are the implications of the findings for research and for teacher education?

What follows are my earliest attempts to answer these questions.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THEIR RESEARCH PROCESSES?

1. No longer awed and intimidated, they became intimately involved with research. They grew more confident reading and criticizing the research findings of others as they became more involved in their own. In one class discussion late in the course, the discussion leader said of a well known writing research article, "93% — humph! Do you know how many students he's talking about? Only 14!" They respected and eagerly read the work of other teacher-researchers. When documentation of the articles was being discussed, a repeated question was how to cite a fellow class member. They began to look at all writing about classroom practices more carefully, asking questions such

as, "Is this research or a report or lesson plans?"

2. They developed research questions of their own, repeatedly modifying their questions and their methodologies. Most rejected the convuntional hypothesis. One teacher reported on the final evening of class that she had finally come up with her research question. Another stated that he still wasn't exactly sure of his. The evolutionary nature of the process became a class theme, sometimes treated humorously, sometimes with rueful respect. If one source of data didn't give them the information they needed, they tried another. If one piece of data was puzzling to them, they went back to their students and asked more questions. They followed up on their hunches.

3. Considerable role tension resulted as they looked closely at how they taught, questioning, evaluating, and writing as they observed. Typical comments were "I personally cannot split myself in two" and "As a researcher, I'm changing behavior." Tension arose when they observed behavior of their own or of their students and wished to change the behavior. Frequently this resulted in a change in teaching method. Several, dissatisfied with answers to their original questions about writing, went back to the students using a different method, thus changing their approach to the students and eliciting the information they were seeking. They were full participant-observers and made full use of themselves as data. They described their interventions openly, sometimes with pride. In their articles their personalities are revealed. Sometimes they record raw relationships with students, the kind that rarely surface in research reports. They do not spare themselves.

4. Their research studies are fully context dependent. The context is

readily apparent, almost tangible. Many of the reports refer to shortened periods and restless students during the series of snowstorms this past winter. Classroom management strategies and student behavior are treated as important variables. One teacher referred to these variables as the "extra murals." Another observed in her log: "When people want to be liked and you tell them you don't like them, you win." She is recording her feelings about managing a class of students and responding to their writing.

5. They were cooperative rather than competitive and eagerly shared the progress of their work with each other, pleased when two of them found something similar. They supported each other with suggestions, encouragement, hard questions, phone calls and visits. They checked out data with each other, validated their analyses and did not rush to be first with their findings. They enjoyed pooling data and looking for similarities. One wrote a long analysis of another group member's draft article and mailed it to her during the interim period between classes. Another group held a special meeting at the home of one of the new mothers so that she could have some responses to her analysis. She, in turn, agreed to give some typing help to another. They did not see research as a way of getting ahead in their careers, but as a way of finding the answers to their questions and sharing those answers with other interested teachers.

6. Although referred to as "writing it up," data analysis was their hardest task. The process of getting through the data analysis followed a general pattern.

a. Deciding what is data and what isn't. At first teachers were not confident that records of their inteventions in the class should be part of their data. They saw data as pure,

meaning uncontaminated by teaching. After deciding that everything that happened was data, they began collecting with a thoroughness that in at least one case resulted in "a volcano of data."

b. Broad theorizing, confidently relating the collected data to their knowledge of writing process and to other research. The confidence was sometimes undermined by the realization that while everything was in the data, perhaps nothing was in it that was special or that could be "found."

c. "Confused, unsure, overwhelmed, discouraged" feelings about data analysis. I wrote this in my research log, recording the repeated words they used to describe their feelings. Some felt that their data was of no value. A typical statement: "I'm seeing it, but I'm not interpreting. I never learned to interpret."

d. Tentative emergence of patterns and classifications of data. One teacher writes, "My categories seem to mean maybe something." Although a few later said that they thought of giving up, most are typified by the teacher who persevered, as she put it, undaunted by her ineptitude.

7. Repeated discussion of findings led the teacher-researchers to see comparable concerns in the research of the class as a whole, repeated patterns that crossed grade levels and disciplines. On December 16 I wrote in my log, "Maybe we won't be able to answer questions, but we are going to know what the questions are." Now I would translate the word question into issue. Issues of importance representing repeated patterns are:

a. Student ownership and control of writing process.

b. A classroom atmosphere that rewards change, risk-taking, and revision.

c. A relationship between self-confidence and writing confidence.

Repeatedly, also, motivation come to be seen as a false issue once certain classroom conditions were achieved.

8. The written reports of their research lack educational jargon for the most

part and acknowledge unanswered questions. One English major researcher remarked that the writing was more difficult than what she was used to because she "didn't have Hamlet to fall back on." The reports reflect enthusiasm. One teacher uses an exclamation point when her student subject catches on after repeated trials! As they wrote, they asked repeatedly, "Who is our audience?" and came to expect it to be other teachers. They wished to write so as to be true to the classroom, to be recognizable by other teachers.

9. Their research is valuable, solid, and in some cases, innovative, adding real and useful findings to the field of writing research. Their research questions are the same as those of other researchers. Where they have looked at questions that have also been studied by other researchers, they have added context. The kinds of findings they produced range on a continuum from case study records of personal journeys ("It had to happen with me first") to a follow-up article on research conducted before the class began. In between are many variations of student and class studies. Their topics reflect a wide range of interests. (see appendix for list of titles)

10. The research was not completed even after the final articles were written. Both the teacher-researchers and their students had a continuing sense of their projects. Students who had been involved in the study would return to discuss their writing. Some changed their attitudes and behavior, regardless of the fact that the teacher's paper had already been written. Many teachers stated that they intend to continue their research, to ask more questions, and to keep writing in their research log.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THEIR TEACHING?

1. Writing honestly about classroom problems, failures as well as successes, in a supportive atmosphere led to more self assurance and encouragement to change. The research logs, written under stress as they often were, in minutes between classes or during the times when the students themselves were writing, were honest writings, harsh sometimes, despairing sometimes. These writings and their authors were accepted by the other teachers and many found they shared the same problems. Teachers who avoided difficult questions about their teaching, who tried to avoid sharing their writings, were pulled up short by the other teachers in their response group. They would say to each other, "Maybe something else is going on. Have you thought about. . . ?" Being honest with themselves and with each other seemed to enable them to change. It was a difficult triple whammy — observing, writing, and analyzing what happened in their classes — a strain, as it was repeatedly described. It was also liberating.

2. Their research plans became their lesson plans. At first most felt they were working double, both teaching and conducting research. As the weeks passed, partly out of necessity to save time, but also out of response to their student responses, some changed their plans to make them more in line with what they were discovering. They began to see teaching more as a learning process rather than a daily routine or performance. The teacher who studied the use of writing to learn math began to develop and change her math curriculum as she discovered more and more things that her students could do. A questionnaire would lead to another followed by an open class discussion that was taped and analyzed. Because they were more in touch with

what their students were thinking, they did not plan in the same way that they had done previously. Tight rigid lesson plans began to give. One teacher invented a mid-term exam that reflected her changed teaching ideas, met the requirements of her principal, and became part of her data. Another wove his data and findings back into his curriculum in a series of studies of American literature, at the same time recording the changes he himself was going through. For many their teaching and research became unified. One teacher wrote that she now "takes the lead from her students."

3. They switched from evaluating to documenting. Initially some expressed disappointment with their data, as if it were a lesson plan gone awry rather than simply what they were going to analyze. The switch to documenting reassured teachers who were accustomed to being disappointed in the work of their students. Irritating classroom behavior, seen as data, became interesting. Error became a sign of growth.

4. They became more tolerant of creative chaos in their thinking (not in classroom behavior) and therefore more understanding of its appearance in their students' thinking and writing. One teacher called herself "a wishy washy Pisces researcher" as she continually refined and developed her research question. They knew from experience what it means to discover your idea gradually as you write and do research. Revision became a commonplace, a fact of life. One teacher reported a sense of "messiness" as part of her teaching, another that whe felt she was "fluttering around hither and thither" as she did her research. Although the teachers were not completely comfortable with these feelings, they were acknowledged as part of the research process and therefore as legitimate parts of the learning processes of their students.

5. They changed their focus from teaching students to finding out what their students knew and then trying to help them learn. One teacher wrote "I'm to the point where I ask them before I ask them." They discovered that their students knew more and could learn more than they had imagined. They reported asking more questions, listening more, and respecting the worries and concerns of the students as legitimate, waiting, rather than rushing in with a suggestion. They received the cooperation and interest of their students in their research. In some cases the students became partners in the project. The students became more aware of their own learning and writing processes. One student chose her own research name. Many of them read the drafts of the reports and made comments to the teacher-researcher. The teachers and their students became learners together and the students began to see their teachers as learners. The teacher-researcher modeled the learning process for his or her students.

6. The teachers were able to try new ways of teaching because they were very sensitive to the classroom variables. While researching, they were examining the context simultaneously with the teaching. Perhaps what happens with some attempts at teacher change is that even though teachers accept new ideas presented in an interesting, authentic, and enthusiastic manner, if the ideas are not compatible with their classroom context, they will not work as they did at the inservice program. During research, however, the context is an examined integral part of the practice and the teacher is receiving constant response from students concerning the context, so that the idea gets a full trial.

7. As a teacher of teacher-researchers, I found the same changes taking place

in myself that I noticed happening to them. We became colleagues learning together. I made honest and direct comments and responses to them about their work. I took more notes on what they said and talked less. On January 20, I noted in my log, "I'm developing a new teaching technique — sending out comments when they're too late to do any good and having them reaffirm what the researchers have already figured out for themselves." This happened accidentally at first because of the many times I returned comments to the teachers later than I had planned. I know that I was helpful to them on some occasions, and they helped me with the material I'm putting together for this article. I'm not sure how permanent the changes are, but I know that I felt uncomfortable with some of the teaching I was doing in another course for teachers, and I began to modify what I was doing there as well.

One teacher who helped me by giving comments on this article in process asked, "Are you going to say how hard it was?" It was hard because of the circumstances under which we were working and because we were new at it. One January night after I got home from class I received a phone call from one of the teachers who said, "It's the first night I haven't been tired since the vacation." We worked hard, but it was a different kind of tired.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHER EDUCATION

1. Teacher-researchers need the opportunity to conduct and follow up on their research, to see it as an ongoing professional activity. Most of the teachers in the course have much more data than they can possibly analyze in these first reports.

2. Most teacher research is qualitative and naturalistic, the kind teachers are best qualified to do because of their experience. If, however, many teachers in a school system were involved in classroom research, their findings could be combined and the beginnings of meaningful quantitative studies be made.

3. Researchers outside of the classroom, possibly associated with local school systems and universities, may wish to do their research in a community where teacher-researchers are at work. If so, they will need to accept the teacher-researchers as equals.

4. The creating of a community of teacher-researchers could change the hierarchy of educational prestige. Their position in the educational community as well as in the community at large seems already to be changing toward one of more respect. Several of the teachers have been asked to share their findings with the faculties of their shcools, although their studies are still in process. They are eager to publish.

5. Teachers will have a changed attitude toward research, but they will insist that if they are to be consumers, research, however complex, must be

readable, considered in the context of real classrooms, and related to practice.

6. Teacher-researchers will write up their findings differently and other teachers will read and respect their research. They will need a place to publish. They will give presentations about their findings showing other teachers how to make use of them in the classroom. One teacher, excited over the group's discussion, said, "We could change the face of the earth!" She was only partly joking.

7. Preservice and inservice programs should include naturalistic research projects conducted in classrooms as part of the curriculum. Teachers need to be encouraged to come up with their own research questions and retain ownership of the research process.

8. Teacher-researchers need a support system that includes university resources and the backing of their local school system. They need the support of fellow researchers, flexible scheduling, released time to analyze data and write, and, as one teacher put it, "xeroxing without guilt."

9. Teacher-researcher positions, grants, and released time in grades K-12 will become a way of rewarding good teachers that goes to the heart of education -- its capacity to effect change. Good teachers will stay in the classroom.

10. Teacher-researchers will influence other teachers. What they find out will have happened in the classroom next door. What they write will be

read. They will be especially good mentors for beginning teachers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Teacher-researchers need to be observed in the classroom to further document their changing teaching practices. One way this could be done would be to have them work in pairs, team teaching and observing each other. Their students' comments on their teaching methods should also be a part of this documentation.

2. The idea of the teacher as model, the way that teacher-researchers model learners for their students, needs further study. Students learn to know what their teachers want; in fact, they may learn this better than any other lesson. The model a teacher projects, his or her feelings about learning, may be best developed through the excitement and confidence a teacher receives from conducting research.

3. Teacher-researchers in other disciplines should be studied to discover how the ideas presented here transfer into fields other than writing research.

In the spring another group of teachers in another Northern Virginia county became interested in conducting writing research in their classrooms. Seven of the teacher-researchers in my class were invited to meet with the new teachers and discuss their research with them. These discussions provided additional commentary (while I was not present) on their feelings, attitudes, and thoughts as they began teaching others to do what they were doing. As an

experienced teacher-researcher discussed methodologies with the group just beginning, one of them stumbled over his words and asked, "Do you think of yourself as a teacher-reacher?"

As I listened to the tape of that conversation, I thought of another comment made about two-thirds of the way through the course by a teacher who used an Alice in Wonderland image to explain how she felt about doing research: "I am grasping a giant window ledge and peeking over a gigantic window sill." Her image was appreciated by all of us, and would, I think, be greeted with a sigh of recognition by most researchers. For me, now, it represents both where we are as teacher-researchers in the larger community of education and, closer to home, where I am in this research. It is an exciting place to be.

May 1982

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APPENDIX

From Research in Writing: Reports from a Teacher-Researcher Seminar. A collection of research reports on the writing processes of students, grades 1-12, prepared by the participants in a teacher-researcher seminar. May, 1982. Northern Virginia Writing Project, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

ARTICLES

Andrena Bratton Blake	The Discoveries of a Teacher of Basics
Peg McDonnell-Culley	After the Writing Project: A Teacher Rights Her Wrongs and a Student Writes Better
Pam Curtis	What Happens When Tenth Graders Use An Adult Editor?
Elizabeth M. Ernst	Students Write and Teachers Write Back--Can It Make a Difference?
Barbara S. Falcone	Why Students Won't Write: A Personal Search
Virginia Fant	Conceptualizing the Main Idea Through the Writing Process
Barbara Gibney	Four out of Seven: Characteristics of Four Competent Seventh Grade Writers
Meg Gibson	Dear Mrs. Gibson
Bernadette M. Glaze	Role Writing to Understand the Past
Patricia Valeska Graap	Open the Door to Inductive Application: Release Anxiety and Math Frustration
Alberta N. Grossman	What Happens When Mickey Writes? Reading Between the Lines
Gloria B. Johnson	Facing the Blank Page
Marion S. MacLean	Voices Within: The Audience Speaks
Gloria A. Rothman	"Are You Going to Write Another Twenty-Seven Page Story?" Second Graders Can Help Each Other Write and Revise
Mary Schulman	The Novice Writer
Ann Sevcik	What Happened When Research Guided My Grammar Lessons
Mildred Swernofsky	The Ungraded Journal
Philip E. Welker	Teaching English to Eleventh Graders

Patty Sue Williams	Four Ways First Graders Revise
Anne Miller Wotring	Writing to Learn
Diane C. Yim	Writing in English: Observations of a Vietnamese Student